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Ellen Brown

The University of Western Ontario

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**THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE
UGLY; AMERICAN
ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION
- AN ANALYSIS OF ANNUAL
MEETINGS FROM THE LAST
DECADE**

Ellen Brown

According to their website, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) is the world's largest organization of individuals interested in anthropology. The organization was founded in 1902 and has continued to grow exponentially (AAA, 2006). The AAA is an American organization that attracts researchers and academics from around the world, specifically those who attest to having an interest in the study or practice of

anthropology. The best glimpse of the events and chaos that accompany the annual AAA mega conference comes from the British scholarly, peer-edited journal *Anthropology Today*. The following is a review of approximately a decade of accounts provided by outsiders looking in on the annual American Anthropological Association Meetings. This journal presents an interesting perspective on these conferences, as it focuses on British perceptions of American academic interactions which are possibly a metaphor for anthropological interactions. The purpose of this paper is to provide a somewhat humorous appreciation of the academic inevitability of conferencing and networking. Conferences and mega-events such as the AAA allow the participant benefits, discomfort, and humility but most of all humour.

The anecdotes from these conferences truly encapsulate the epitome of networking. The foundation of this paper is established through reviews of the reports and stories provided by attendees and subsequently published in the journal *Anthropology Today*. The content of these articles provide detailed observation into the tradition of networking. The titles of the articles offer insight into the attendees' modes of thinking. The first account examined was the synopsis of the 1986 AAA Meeting in Washington D.C. entitled *Crossing Escalators* by Ronald Frankenberg. Titles of subsequent reports include *Sampling Anthropology with a Southern Accent*, in reference to the 1994 Meeting in Atlanta; *Time with the Other: A diary in the AAA Sense of the term*, about the 1997 Meeting in Washington; *Love, Terror and Nostalgia in Washington*, in regard to the 2001 Meeting again in Washington; *A Supermarket of Anthropology*, the 2002 Meeting in New Orleans; and *Weasel Words*

and Straight Talk, to the 2003 Meeting in Chicago.

One theme continuously reappears in these accounts, that of the hotel, which serves as an enduring metaphor for the events of each of the conferences. For Frankenberg at the 1986 Meeting, the hotel acts as a "soap opera" (Frankenberg 1987: 21). "Since the meetings coincide ... with the Army-Navy football game on this occasion, one met in the elevators sixpack-carrying, seven foot giants in dress uniforms carrying encouraging streamers saying 'down with the army', making me feel both more and less at home than usual" (Frankenberg 1987: 21). The 1992 Meeting held at the San Francisco Hilton was described as having 547 sessions in 64 rooms and the "super, meta or hyper modernist architecture made them more difficult to find" (Frankenberg 1993: 20). The 2002 Meeting hotel appeared to be "a giant temple of consumerism with its own built-in shopping mall, and a W.H. Smith which does not stock a single book....For coffee there is a choice between Starbucks or Dunkin' Donuts...None of the conference rooms have windows. Job interviews take place in what looks like a hospital ward" (Berg 2003: 22). The 2003 Conference synopsis

charges that American anthropology has been hijacked by postmodernism seem to have little foundation, given the grumbling over the layout of the convention. The Hyatt Regency New Orleans was one of the most confusing venues yet, with staircases that skipped floors, a seemingly random distribution of panels, and a generally circular layout that went nowhere. The whole site was practically a metaphor for the postmodern text, yet no one seemed to enjoy it (Peterson 2004).

One of the conference topics consisted of debating whether or not post-modernism is actually dead. Moreover, for the 2005 Meeting it was argued that the, "Detailed architectural plans printed in miniature made little difference [to finding ones way around]. The Wardman Park Marriott brought a sense of endless bafflement, too, at the seemingly endless diversity and diversification of what 'anthropology' means" (Forbess 2006: 23). Personally, this author doubts that hotels were chosen to correspond to the conference theme or vice versa; however, these metaphors, in the name of humour cannot be ignored.

Two elements included in the American Anthropological Association conference planning are invited sessions and a distinguished lecture series. In the 1988 conference report, invited sessions were described as "equivalent to a rosette in the Michelin Guide [which] presumably attracts a higher attendance" (Benthall 1989: 22). It appears that there is no shame in advertising chosen academic topics such as high-class restaurants, although the question must be asked, who is responsible for the said chosen 'invited' topics? Similarly, "The Distinguished Lecture is given as the climax of the week at about 10 p.m. after a full day's work, numerous parties and finally the presentation of eight awards for service to anthropology" (Benthall 1989: 23).

Another common thread throughout the accounts is references to the sheer size of the Meetings. In reference to the 1993 Meeting it was suggested, "to the visitor from Britain, a large American academic conference like that of the American Anthropological Association seems like the intellectual equivalent of a huge shopping mall" (Thomas 1994: 21). Pick up a parcel here, and a potential Masters or Doctoral supervisor there. The 1995 Conference was described as consisting of

an ever-growing number of workshops (e.g. 'How to turn your dissertation into a book,' 'Acting out ...debriefing,' 'Creative ethnographic writing,'). power breakfasts (not to mention luncheons, receptions, wine and cheese roundtables, 'get acquainted' cash bars), orientation meetings, and network sessions. It is organization being carried to the point where organizational synthesis is corroded by organizational specialization (Smith 1996: 22).

Similar to the 1993 Meeting, the format of the 2002 Conference was described as "in a way more like that of a fair than a scholarly conference, a supermarket of anthropology" (Berg 2003: 22). Do not forget your shopping list! Alternatively, the number of participants is also a subject of frequent discussion. An examination of the number of sessions during the conference yields an approximate correlation of participants. As Forbess and Candea (2006) suggest,

Possibly prompted by jet lag and rather too much coffee. I was inspired to calculate the scale of the AAA event as follows: how long would it have taken one person, working nine to five, to attend all the panels which were presented during the 104th [which would have been the 2005] Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association? The answer, according to my estimate, is around six months – with weekends off, but no holidays.

The above brings us to a question. What is the purpose of such a conference? One of the purposes is arguably networking. In terms of networking, "First-time attenders, graduate students or recent PhDs look on and feel, realistically, excluded by these embraces and cries of esoterically shortened names" (Frankenberg 1987: 22).

The best and most graphic account of the process of networking is provided by Nigel Rapport (1998) who suggests,

Having registered at the conference booth in the Hilton Hotel, I find Gisli Palsson and Nurit Bird-David jointly wandering at the frenetic networking at American conferences – even now beginning to happen all around them. To me it feels like the moment of transition before driving into water: my bodily sensorium, I know, is about to be transformed, but do I have the energy and desire really to continue with it all – all that trashing about in conversation?

Ronnie Frankenberg (2000) suggests that while at the 1999 AAA Meetings in Washington D.C. he needed to be convinced to 'network',

Bribed with the gift of two free drinks, I began to socialize and to renew acquaintances with those met in previous years, many hesitantly, because like me they had arrived late on the evening of the first day and had not yet acquired through registration the admirably large, clear identification tabs which suggest, that at US conferences, unlike those in Britain, the organization wishes you not only to know to whom you are talking but to appear that to have known all along.

Brian Moeran, discussing the 2001 Meeting suggests, "The emphasis on personal networking among local American anthropologists leads peripherals to see the American branch of our discipline as little more than a mutual admiration society. Of course (and we don't have to read Bourdieu to know it), all national associations of anthropologists are characterized by such tendencies in one way or another" (Moeran 2002: 26). Would anyone really object to being admired by his or her peers?

Aside from an emphasis on networking, the accounts of the AAA hardly vary, concerning the purpose of the Annual Meetings. "There are parties, ritual breakfasts and lunches, wild orgiastic evening feasts, an Annual Ball, book sales and an employment fair" (Frankenberg, 2000). Mette Louise Berg (2003: 22) suggests that the AAA Meetings include, "'Rumour mongering' ... everybody is exchanging gossip at a furious pace. Dinner time is the time for self-promotion, when some established male academics hold court and treat younger female colleagues either to neat self-aggrandizement or a cocktail or mock self-deprecation and sexual innuendo." Is this something new to add to the shopping list, a new boyfriend/girlfriend perhaps? Nancy Lindisfarne (2004: 27) states it best,

The Annual AAA Meeting remains an extraordinary ritual. For five days, more than 5000 anthropologists track up and down the lifts. They pile in and out of hundreds of meetings in portioned beige venues with strange, sequenced names, and they sit in ballroom congregations to be blessed by the great and the good. Many of the men are besuited, while the women's outfits tend to be black, brightened by a splash of colour and some understated touch of exotica.

Despite what the perception of the Meetings might be or for that matter its stated purpose, it cannot be denied that, "After all the AAA is a social occasion" (Rapport 1997: 21).

Of the ten years of reports examined, one sticks out as a favourite. Not only was it humorous, but also very applicable to the topic of networking. This particular article presents conferences in an innovative and somewhat imaginative way. The article is about the 1993 AAA Meeting held in Washington D.C. by Margaret Willson. In

this article, Willson (1994: 19-20) details her actions at the 1993 AAA as "Session surfing ... sliding from sessions of interest, to coffee, to sessions of friends, to coffee, to sessions of chance, to coffee." She draws a comparison between two unlikely entities, the AAA Meetings and MTV. "So many papers, so many images, so much talk. MTV of anthropology, bite-sized flashes that left provocative tastes, bombarded our tongues until they lay inert and numb from idea overload." As she starts to question the details of one of the sessions attended, she states the need to, "Change channels, back to MTV. Is Anthropology in danger of popularization or are we being left behind while 'cultural studies' programmes capitalize on diversity? Must have slipped into PBS by mistake." As she discusses how she felt throughout the day, at a point she felt as though it had been "too much. Through no fault of its own, the last paper had scraped across my stomach like Poe's pendulum. I escaped to the Chinese bagel deli across the street. Fifteen minutes alone." While alone in her hotel room contemplating the events of the day and the conference, Willson establishes that in comparison to the British, "Americans love to confess. They'll do it anywhere, in a supermarket line if you let them." By the time that the end of the conference arrives, Willson feels, "Saturday night burnout Better to wander the streets of Washington D.C., seeing all the tourist sights one has missed because the entire last few days have been spent inside the Hilton Hotel." Again, the hotel serves as the set for the soap opera, or for Willson, the MTV program she has existed within for the week.

It cannot be denied that conferences are a significant aspect of academia. They allow colleagues to get together, to see what each other has been up to, to meet new, up-and-coming, and distinguished members of their own and occasionally other academic

disciplines, and to present research. The AAA Meetings are among the largest academic conferences (not just anthropological) in North America, if not the world. The American Anthropological Association has a long history and avid following. However, the Meetings are not without their problems.

The 1996 Meeting was plagued with issues surrounding the infamous Science Wars, this instance specifically attributable to the article published by a certain physicist in the journal *Social Text*. Patrick Tierney overcast the 2000 Meeting with controversy surrounding the very recent release of his book *Darkness in El Dorado*. This controversy launched the now infamous feud, so to speak between Tierney and Napoleon Chagnon. The 2001 Meeting in Washington D.C. took place about a month following the events of September 11th. The 2004 Meeting that was supposed to be in San Francisco came under scrutiny when the unionized workers of the Hilton went on strike and set up a picket line. After a debate and the suggestion of anthropologists having to cross the picket line, the conference was moved to Atlanta; of the 5000 registered participants, 800 showed up (Leitner and Wilson 2005). This strike left a lasting impression with this year's Meetings moved from San Francisco to San Jose. With the exception of the 2004 Meeting that saw incredibly decreased attendance, the number of presentations and the number of delegates continues to increase.

In terms of conferences, size does matter. The AAA, through its diverse and extensive membership and annual meetings, allows the anthropological community to engage with each other. The importance of networking, presenting one's own research and making connections that cross time and space cannot be overemphasized. The perspective offered above, hopefully humorous and not demeaning, is but one

portrayal, albeit of many experiences, of the events and happenings at the annual Meetings and gatherings of the American Anthropological Association. The challenge is at the next conference you attend: find the hilarity, the hidden metaphor, the unique experience, and the opportunities presented to you. Meet, network, learn and smile.

"How do I love thee AAA Meetings? Let me count the ways, y'all." – Robert Browning et al. (Rapport 1994: 20).

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